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## Chiller-Dillers for the Shiver-and-Shudder Set: *The Whistler* Film Series

### Abstract

This article explores the serial dynamics behind and within the succession of B-films Columbia Pictures developed from the popular CBS radio program *The Whistler*. It examines how this anthology series developed within Columbia's ongoing strategy of low-budget production, while responding to specific industrial challenges facing 1940s B-films. Besides looking at broader synergies between radio and cinema during this period, the article also qualifies the tendency to categorize the *Whistler* movies as films noir, suggesting it is more productive to view them as products of a broader pulp serialscape that is shaped by alternative cultural and industrial logics.

### Keywords

B-film, film series, US radio, film noir, William Castle, Val Lewton, Cornell Woolrich

In October 1944 the *Hollywood Reporter* described the Columbia Pictures B-film *The Whistler* as one of the 'freak attractions of the year'.<sup>1</sup> The reviewer may simply have been referring to the film's surprise success with both audiences and critics, but other commentators were quick to note the unusual qualities of this 'freakish' film. The *New York Post*, for example, identified it as 'an off-the-beaten-path movie ... a neatly turned study of fear ... [that] will surprise and may even please you'.<sup>2</sup> Several critics regarded the film as giving a twist to established generic categories, with *Variety* tagging it 'a new

type of gangster-killer melodrama'<sup>3</sup> and *Showmen's Trade Review* identifying it as a 'mixed psychological and horror picture'.<sup>4</sup> *New York World-Telegram* critic Alton Cook similarly evaluated *The Whistler* in relation to horror movies, but claimed it was vastly superior to the 'usual fare of claptrap thrillers' shown at the Rialto cinema: 'This is written, played and directed for adult attention, no mere collection of scenes to scare an audience with creeping hands and shadowy figures ... [but] one of the year's most compact and movingly narrated man hunt stories'.<sup>5</sup> The 'freakishness' of *The Whistler* derives not so much from its hybridization of traditional movie genres, however, as from its combination of the aesthetic regimes of film and radio. Based on a successful radio thriller series broadcast exclusively, at that time, on the CBS Pacific network, the film did especially well with audiences and critics in New York City, where the radio program was unknown – a factor that only enhanced its strangeness and novelty.<sup>6</sup>

The product of a serial phenomenon in another medium, the film version of *The Whistler* would itself initiate a series of seven further films from 1944 to 1948. The translation of this property from radio to screen was part of a broader trend in contemporary Hollywood. In a 1940 article for *Broadcasting* magazine, David Glickman suggested that, after years of rivalry, film producers were increasingly turning to radio for story properties – especially for their low-budget serial formats.<sup>7</sup> Thus, several studios developed chapter-plays from *The Shadow* (1937–46), *The Lone Ranger* (1938–39), the juvenile radio serial *The Adventures of Red Ryder* (1940) and *The Green Hornet* (1940–41). Radio sitcoms and dramas likewise inspired several Hollywood film series, such as *The Aldrich Family* (eleven Paramount films from 1939 to

1944), *Fibber McGee and Molly* (three RKO films, 1941–44) and its spin-off *The Great Gildersleeve* (four RKO films, 1942–44), and the folksy medical drama *Dr. Christian* (six RKO films, 1939–41). Beyond the traffic from radio to screen, both media routinely built series and serials from properties that originated elsewhere – among them comedies like *Blondie* and *Scattergood Baines*, the Buck Rogers space operas, the adventures of supervillain Fu Manchu, and a large and diverse roster of crime fighters that included Sherlock Holmes, Charlie Chan, Nick Carter, Boston Blackie, Nero Wolfe, Bulldog Drummond, Dick Tracy, The Lone Wolf, The Falcon, The Saint, Michael Shayne, and *The Thin Man*'s sleuthing couple Nick and Nora Charles.

In adapting properties from the broadcast medium, Hollywood producers had to negotiate not only the distinct aesthetic regimes of radio and film but also the different rhythms of seriality that coordinated production and consumption in the two media. Although audiences attended the cinema on a more frequent basis than they do today, they could engage with their favourite radio programs on a weekly or, in some cases, daily basis. As Michele Hilmes argues, the medium's 'fundamental seriality' was perhaps 'the most significant and enduring contribution that radio made to the expressive forms of the twentieth century'.<sup>8</sup> Individual programs (of whatever genre) were planned and produced as serial units that were delivered to audiences at regular times, within a coordinated and predictable schedule built on serial principles. US radio's intensified seriality was designed to encourage regular listening and draw consumers back repeatedly to the network, to programs, and to advertisers' messages. Even though cinematic seriality worked at a slower

and less regular pace, companies seeking to develop bankable film series may well have been attracted by programs with proven serial pedigree – and their track record of generating differentiated iterations of stock characters and plot elements.

With the *Whistler* films Columbia Pictures sought to capitalize on a successful radio program, adding to a growing portfolio of serial properties that included both chapter-plays and film series. But the studio also had other priorities in launching this particular series, which it initiated in the midst of heated protests from exhibitors and others about the poor quality of material destined for the lower half of double bills. The selective assimilation of a radio aesthetic allowed Columbia to make a series that worked both as a presold property and as a distinctive proposition – qualities that rendered it a shrewd response to the contested climate of contemporary low-budget production. But it would be short-sighted to regard the *Whistler* series as simply and exclusively a transposition of the radio series for, as I will suggest later, the producers drew on a much wider network of cinematic and cultural influences. Before doing so, however, I will outline the broader context of 1940s B-series production, as a means of specifying the industrial significance of the *Whistler* films.

### **Studio-Era Film Series**

The feature film series was established as an integral component of Hollywood studio production from the early 1930s, as motion picture companies sought to cope with financial pressures resulting from the Great Depression and with the increased demand for product arising from the

popularity of double-bill programming.<sup>9</sup> Although there were a few A-ranking film series, they were mostly low-status affairs designed for a subordinate role on cinema programs, or for subsidiary markets. Series production of low-budget features was especially popular among thinly capitalized studios like Republic, Monogram and PRC as well as the lower-tier mini-majors Universal and Columbia and the often embattled major company RKO.<sup>10</sup> As Tino Balio argues, the film series proved an effective strategy for minimizing risk, allowing companies to tailor production to audience demand and to encourage consumer loyalty:

Once successfully launched, a series creates loyal and eager fans who form a core audience. By keeping production costs in line with this ready-made demand, series pictures are almost guaranteed to make a profit. The problem, of course, is to hit upon a theme or subject that will keep an audience's interest beyond the sequel.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, few series were cinematic originals, as producers gravitated instead to affordable properties with proven appeal, scouring novels, magazines, radio or the stage for material that could potentially attract repeat audiences and were capable of differentiated reworking across multiple episodes. In many cases, the original properties already enjoyed a thriving serial existence before they reached cinema. In such cases, the film series was part of a much broader popular cultural mediascape, or *serialscape*, with such figures as Nick Carter, Dick

Tracy, Charlie Chan or Blondie Bumstead circulating across a wide range of media forms, often for decades, with each transmedial incarnation consolidating and renewing the appeal, meaningfulness, relevance and commercial vitality of such characters.<sup>12</sup> Films based on established serial properties benefitted from, and in turn helped publicize, other media iterations, in a mutually reinforcing cross-promotional synergy.

Where film series provided the major cinema corporations with useful assets that allowed them to maintain healthy balance sheets, companies operating on very small margins relied on them for their very survival. Monogram Pictures, for example, picked up several series discarded by the Hollywood majors – including the Dead End Kids, Charlie Chan and the Cisco Kid – and by the end of the 1940s had become the most prolific producer of film series.<sup>13</sup> Like other B-movies, series films operated under severe financial constraints, as distributors generally rented them for a flat fee rather than the percentage deals accorded A-movies.<sup>14</sup> This allowed producers to plan production costs and revenues, but limited the rewards should a B-film prove unexpectedly successful.

Saddled with diminished budgets, shooting schedules, and production values, and with miniscule promotional muscle, supporting features obviously could not aspire to the same quality thresholds as A-films. As the principal attraction on cinema programs, A-features were expected to demonstrate originality and distinctiveness but product differentiation was not so vital for B-films. From this perspective, the series film possessed certain advantages over other B-product, as each film featuring, say, Blondie or Sherlock Holmes

inherited stature and audience interest from its cinematic and extra-cinematic forebears. The market potential of such films could thus reassure exhibitors who were concerned about unappealing B-product foisted on them through the major companies' block-booking policies.<sup>15</sup> Where non-series B-films had to stand on their own, ostensive seriality provided an insurance policy that could cover any liabilities in the individual film. The B-series also, of course, permitted substantial economies in production. As Thomas Schatz observes about MGM's Andy Hardy films: 'Not only the casting, but the sets, props, music, even the story formula itself could be standardized, rendering what was already a low-budget enterprise that much more efficient and economical'.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, Balio notes, series films had become 'a staple of double-feature exhibition', with Hollywood producing over seventy different series in a range of genres aimed at diverse audiences – including Westerns, family films, youth films, comedies, horror films, and detective films.<sup>17</sup> In the 1940–41 season, Schatz estimates, series films constituted over ten per cent of Hollywood features produced by all studios except Warner Brothers and United Artists.<sup>18</sup> Through the early 1940s, however, several developments affected the status of the series film as a standardized fixture of low-budget production – and helped shape the context that gave rise to the *Whistler* films.

One key factor arose from legal action threatened against the studios' monopolistic practices. In July 1938, the US Department of Justice filed an anti-trust suit against the eight major cinema companies on behalf of independent exhibitors, charging them, as Mae D. Huettig puts it, with 'combining and conspiring to restrain trade in the production, distribution, and



exhibition of motion pictures, and with attempting successfully to monopolize such trade in violation of the Sherman Act'.<sup>19</sup> To sidestep legal scrutiny, the five fully-integrated majors signed a consent decree in October 1940, through which they agreed to modify block-booking from blocks of thirty or so to blocks of five films, and to replace blind selling with trade showings of future releases. The consent decree led the five majors to reduce their production volume, as they focussed on more costly first-run releases and presold properties.<sup>20</sup> Universal, Columbia and United Artists – the partially integrated 'Little Three', who were minor defendants in the antitrust suit – refused to sign the consent decree by the agreed date of June 1942, rendering it invalid. Universal and Columbia relied heavily on full-season block-booking to guarantee a market for their product, and continued with this policy. Although the action of the Little Three invalidated the consent decree, the vertically integrated major companies persisted with blocks of reduced size in a bid to stave off further legal measures – which ultimately proved unsuccessful.<sup>21</sup>

While Columbia resisted the consent decree, they were aware how it was encouraging competitors to enhance the quality of their films. Notwithstanding the extraordinary box-office boom generated by wartime conditions, which increased demand for all films, Columbia thus came under pressure to upscale its productions. There were further incentives to create more distinctive films, especially in the arena of low-budget production. With wartime restrictions affecting the availability of film stock and materials needed for set construction, government officials questioned the value of double-bill programming.<sup>22</sup> In November 1942, Lowell Mellett, director of the Motion Picture Bureau of the Office of War Information (OWI), added to the

longstanding controversy over the quality of dual features by arguing that they usurped vital resources needed for the war effort as well as the screen time available for government films. Previously castigated in some quarters for being 'evil', double bills were now charged with being wasteful and even unpatriotic.<sup>23</sup> Although Mellett was overruled by OWI chief Elmer Davis, who insisted the government would not interfere directly in the leisure industry, his intervention was nonetheless a warning shot to Hollywood producers of low-budget fare.<sup>24</sup> Despite complaints from some exhibitors about the poor quality of many films, about block-booking strategies, and about the very length of cinema bills, double feature programming was extremely popular with many audiences.<sup>25</sup> Even so, the debate about double bills and the quality of B-films raged on.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Darmour-Columbia 'Radio Series'**

It is within this context that Columbia Pictures developed *The Whistler* as the launchpad for a potential film series. Like the poverty row companies, Columbia operated on tight margins and relied heavily on low-budget fare.<sup>27</sup> It had produced a few series in the 1920s - for example four films based on Michael Lanyard's Lone Wolf character - but did not fully commit to a series production model until 1937, when it also began making chapter-plays. Columbia series included a revival of the *Lone Wolf* property (mostly starring Warren William), the *Blondie* films, the *Wild Bill Hickok* Western series, *The Five Little Peppers* family comedies, and the *Boston Blackie* crime series. The company's involvement with radio properties came about courtesy of prolific cine-entrepreneur Larry Darmour, whose independent production company

signed a rolling distribution deal with Columbia in 1935. For Columbia, Darmour initially built several Western and adventure series around performers such as Ken Maynard, 'Wild Bill' Elliot and, especially, Jack Holt. He revised his production strategy in 1940 to focus instead on fictional series with pre-sold appeal – a policy he had already pursued with short films for FBO and RKO in the 1920s that were based on popular comic strips and magazine fiction. Darmour negotiated a three-year option on screen rights to the popular detective figure Ellery Queen, who had featured in novels and magazine stories since 1929.<sup>28</sup> Darmour's main inspiration, however, was *The Adventures of Ellery Queen*, a popular radio series that began on CBS in June 1939 with scripts written by Manfred B. Lee and Frederick Dannay (two cousins who wrote under the joint pseudonym 'Ellery Queen').<sup>29</sup>

Larry Darmour assigned pulp magazine writer Eric Taylor to script the *Ellery Queen* films, a service he would later provide for six *Crime Doctor* films and two of the *Whistler* movies.<sup>30</sup> Featuring Ralph Bellamy and then William Gargan as the title character, the *Ellery Queen* movies are typical B-series detective films that blend together crime, romance and comedy. These breezy B-films transform the elegant amateur detective and crime writer into an often inept blunderer, demonstrating that fidelity to an original property was not as significant as the ability to capitalize on its name value.<sup>31</sup> Darmour initially planned a series of thirteen films but objections from Lee and Dannay forced it to terminate after seven episodes.<sup>32</sup> Following Darmour's early death in March 1942, long-time production manager Rudolph Flothow continued his legacy by supervising new series and serials for Darmour Productions, which persisted as a 'feeder unit' for Columbia.<sup>33</sup> To replace the *Ellery Queen* films, Flothow

lined up the *Crime Doctor* (1943–49) and the *Whistler* (1944–48) series, both similarly deriving from original CBS radio programs.<sup>34</sup> These two film series were more distinctive than the *Ellery Queen* movies, as well as being more in tune with cultural and media trends of the 1940s.

The ten *Crime Doctor* films were built around venerable star Warner Baxter, then coming to the end of a four-decade career. Baxter plays Benjamin Ordway, a former criminal mastermind who, after a spell of amnesia, reconstructs himself as a criminal psychologist. Unburdened by the romantic and comic subplots found in the *Ellery Queen* movies and many other detective series, the *Crime Doctor* films are relatively sober affairs – with Ordway's profession allowing them to flirt with the contemporary vogue for psychoanalytic themes, which accelerated during the Second World War. Although the films include amnesia, PTSD, 'split personality' disorder, persecutory fantasies and the like, Ordway mostly functions as a more orthodox detective who relies on deduction rather than psychoanalytic skills to solve crimes. Even so, contemporary reviewers commended the series for achieving some memorable 'mood scenes' or scenes of 'eerie atmosphere' – especially the entries directed by William Castle.<sup>35</sup> The detective may seek to rationalize and dispel psychological dysfunction, but such brooding set-pieces revel in sensations that refuse easy dismissal. Liberated from the constraints of the detective narrative, the *Whistler* films would provide a more conducive context for such sequences.

Like the *Crime Doctor* movies, the *Whistler* films are built around an ageing star (Richard Dix) and use many of the same production personnel (most notably William Castle and Eric Taylor), but they make very different use

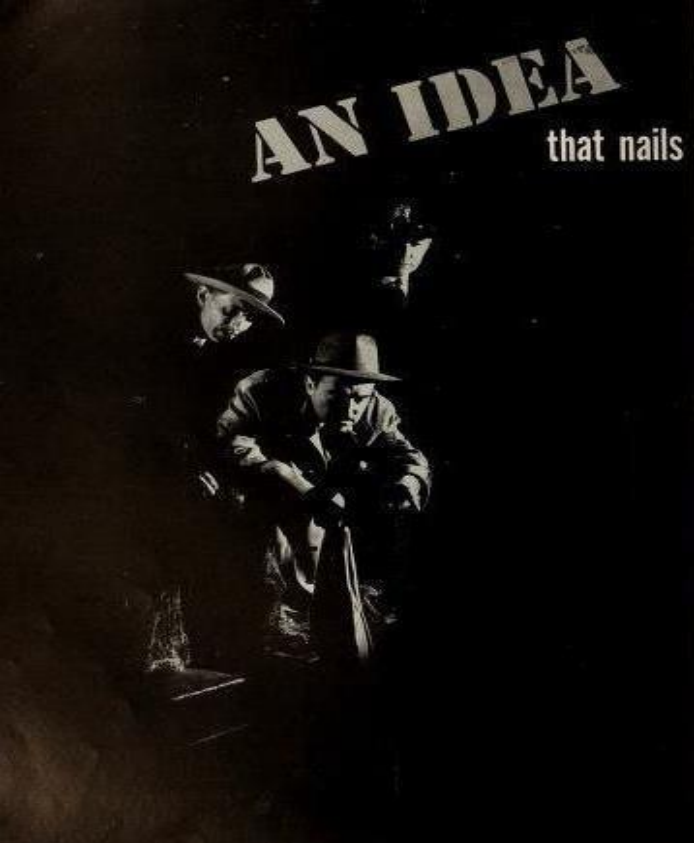
of the series format. Besides abandoning the detective narrative, the films' most striking departure from convention came through a highly eccentric handling of their leading man. Most studio-era series are built around a serial character, or serial figure, who returns from film to film to engage in distinct if rather similar adventures, with the serial figure mostly played by a recurring performer.<sup>36</sup> Richard Dix was a key selling point for the *Whistler* series, but instead of playing the same character he was cast in a different role in each film.<sup>37</sup> As I will suggest, this generates an unusual serial dynamic. Moreover, while the *Ellery Queen* and *Crime Doctor* series were inspired by radio, and promoted their association with the medium, they make no attempt to emulate its aesthetic particularities. By directly evoking the atmospheric and aesthetic specificity of radio drama, however, the *Whistler* films emerge as a highly distinctive B-film series. Where the *Crime Doctor* movies come alive in isolated sequences, the *Whistler* films are more audacious in their narrative method, their treatment of identity, and their visual and aural style.

### ***The Whistler*: Radio Series**

The *Whistler* radio series was part of a deluge of crime, thriller and horror programs that flooded the airwaves in the early 1940s, and which prompted numerous complaints about broadcasters overdoing nerve-racking tales of terror and violence.<sup>38</sup> Although *The Whistler* shared a kinship with programs such as *The Shadow* (1937–54) and *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* (1941–52) it sought, like its CBS stablemate *Suspense* (1942–62), to exploit pulp sensations while rendering them acceptable. In a 1944 advertisement, for example, CBS Pacific proclaimed that 'With mystery shows crowding the air

and bodies lying stacked in studios', *The Whistler* was 'exceptional' because it had 'better ideas for plots, better ideas for characterizations, for creating atmosphere, for sound effects. In short – more thought applied to attaining a superior radio production'.<sup>39</sup> Part of its distinctiveness, one commentator suggested, was that it offered 'a series of plays based on the psychological rather than on straight crime detection or the supernatural'.<sup>40</sup>

Some fourteen months after the series first hit the air in May 1942, the trade journal *Broadcasting* pinpointed its appeal in an evocative advertising copy (Fig. 1a–b): 'A year ago an idea was born. A new program started in the West. A low, sinister whistle pierced the blackness. Eerie music blended with the whistle ... then a man's voice, low, apprehensive. For a half-hour listeners sat spell-bound'.<sup>41</sup>



**AN IDEA that nails 551,000 families to their chairs!**

A year ago an *idea* was born. A new program started in the West.  
A low, sinister whistle pierced the blackness. Eerie music blended with the whistle... then a man's voice, low, apprehensive. For a half-hour listeners sat spell-bound.

*The Whistler* was on the air over Columbia Pacific!

Now, a year later, listeners still sit spell-bound, every Friday night at nine. 39.7% of all available radio families now listen to this program. That means a Hooper rating of 11.2. That means 551,000 families actively listening.

The story of *The Whistler* is the story of all Columbia Pacific originations. It's a story of *ideas*. *Ideas* are the power-force in radio. *Ideas* are the starting point of every Columbia Pacific campaign.

*Ideas*—projected by superlative execution—make programs on Columbia Pacific strikingly successful. *The Whistler*, for example: It was written by top Hollywood writers. Then it was cast with top Hollywood talent, and produced by the sure-footed staff of Columbia in the West... the staff responsible for so many of the great coast-to-coast CBS shows!

Columbia Pacific serves some five million Western families—five million families who have the will to buy and the cash to pay. Through Columbia Pacific you can reach these families—reach them with *ideas*... attention-arresting, action-impelling *ideas*—translated into radio programs that build West Coast audiences into a buying army for you.

Such programs as *The Whistler* are now available for sale on Columbia Pacific. Ask us or Radio Sales for details. Or ask us to create an *idea* for you... an *idea* planned to tell your story more dramatically than it's ever been told before.

**COLUMBIA Pacific NETWORK**

A DIVISION OF THE COLUMBIA BROADCASTING SYSTEM  
Palace Hotel, San Francisco 5—Columbia Square, Hollywood 28.  
Represented by Radio Sales, the SPOT Broadcasting Division of CBS.




Figure 1a–b. Trade advertisement for radio's *The Whistler*, published in *Broadcasting*, July 19, 1943, pp. 30–31 (Media History Digital Library).

As the advertisement makes clear, the program was crafted to 'nail' listeners to their chairs, enthralling them with atmospheric scenarios of psychological intrigue. The riveting effect of *The Whistler* is neatly illustrated by a vignette from Carolyn Cassady's 1990 memoir *Off the Road*, in which she tells of driving from Los Angeles to the Mexican border in 1952 with Jack Kerouac, her husband Neal and their two daughters:

The sky was deep and clear, and all of us were wistful, in tune with the knowledge it was our last night together. We listened to radio dramas, *First Nighter* and *The Whistler*. During the latter Neal became so emotionally involved that Jack and I had to laugh and remind him repeatedly that it was only a play. He probably was putting it on, but his absorption made me nervous.<sup>42</sup>

*The Whistler* aimed for the kind of affective intensity Neal Cassady exhibits here, whether he was faking it or not. The program clearly succeeded, as it remained one of the most popular series on the CBS Pacific network for fourteen years, consistently rated among the top fifteen radio shows in the region, and often in the top three. In the hands of experienced audio practitioners, such programs exploited the capacity of radio drama to stir the imagination through evocative audio that compelled the listeners to furnish

their own images as they 'staged' the drama in their mind.<sup>43</sup> By the 1940s, audio drama had become an extremely sophisticated practice that dealt increasingly and self-consciously with psychological themes, and with new techniques for exploring them.<sup>44</sup> The inwardness of experiencing radio drama found a generically-modulated parallel within the mode of 'interiorized' dramatization that producers cultivated in the audio plays of *Suspense* and other series.

While noting that its plots could be 'standard pulp', a 1947 *Billboard* reviewer nonetheless deemed *The Whistler* 'one of the neater, pseudo-psychological chiller-dillers on the air' that was aimed at 'the shiver-and-shudder set'.<sup>45</sup> What made the program stand out, the reviewer suggested, was the emphasis on 'psycho[logical] overtones', rather than the murder itself, and 'the technic of having the Whistler's disembodied voice represent the criminal's conscience while at the same time serving as story narrator'.<sup>46</sup> As esteemed radio critic John Crosby suggested, *The Whistler* stories 'are not whodunits in the ordinary sense: for one thing, the story is told from the point of view of the criminal'.<sup>47</sup> Where detective stories conceal the identity of the malefactor until the final moments, the Whistler introduces us to the criminal at the outset and allows us privileged access to the psychological compulsions that motivate the crime: we follow the various stages of its plotting and execution, until the scheme unravels through a last-minute reversal. The program thus teases with different enigmas than the conventional mystery story: How exactly will the criminal's scheme be undone? Can you guess the final reversal that will bring them to justice? The dramas, one *Variety* reviewer suggested, thus 'reach a climax rather than a solution ... and retribution results from the criminal



outsmarting himself rather than from clever investigation by the police or a private eye'.<sup>48</sup>

Where episodes of *Suspense* often provide access to the protagonist's subjectivity through interior monologue, *The Whistler* adopts a strategy of external focalization, with its heterodiegetic narrator ventriloquizing the central character's mental processes. 'The Strange Sisters' (#192, 28 January 1946) provides a characteristic example. The story focusses on the bitter and twisted Pamela Randall, who is manipulating her susceptible youngest sister, Kathy, as part of a scheme to wreak vengeance on their middle sibling, Sally. Midway through the drama, the Whistler steps in to convey the warped thinking of the envious Pamela, using the second-person mode of address that is a hallmark of the program's storytelling method:

Well, Pamela, jealousy can do strange things to a mind like yours, can't it? And it's a peculiar mind, filled to the bursting point with frustrated black hatred for your sister Sally.

Accumulated during the long years the three of you spent under the same roof with your father. She always had everything, didn't she? You and Kathy had to take what was left – and like it.

Yes, Pamela, that jealous hatred has brought you to the point where you'll stop at nothing! Lying! Cheating! Twisting the truth in such a way that your poor, gullible sister Kathy believes the very existence of Sally condemns her to begging for crumbs at Sally's table, when the bread is rightfully hers. And you've thought of everything, haven't you, Pamela? You're confident

that Kathy is prepared for the talk with Sally that's bound to come sooner or later ....

Rather than conveying Pamela's thought processes neutrally, this malicious and contemptuous master of ceremonies filters them through his taunting assessment of her character. The Whistler delights in the ultimate unravelling of the felonious enterprises of miscreants like Pamela: as John Dunning suggests, he is 'a voice of fate, baiting the guilty with his smiling malevolence'.<sup>49</sup> This passage has a clear plot function but it also helps build a strong atmosphere of psychological malaise that is one of the program's most memorable features, over and above the particular stories it tells. As John Crosby noted, besides delivering the expected crime-does-not-pay message, *The Whistler's* stories are also 'moody little jobs'.<sup>50</sup> The film series strove to replicate this emphasis on psychological mood, or eerie atmosphere.

Another distinctive feature of the program was its resistance to the ghoulish, often comic hyperbole of contemporaneous horror series like *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* – or what *Suspense* producer William Spier later derided as the 'clanking chains' school of radio horror.<sup>51</sup> George Allen, who produced and directed *The Whistler* for several years, stressed in a 1946 *Radio Life* interview that the writers and production team took pains to play fair with the audience in plotting the twists and turns of the drama: 'We make use of every opportunity to present a logical story. It could happen to you!'<sup>52</sup> Reviewing an early episode from 1942 ('Cold Fury'), *Billboard* further observed that '*The Whistler* is a show that holds the listener. Outstanding feature is the story. It isn't fantastic, but more like an episode from crime annals enacted'.<sup>53</sup> The

program may stress the quotidian nature of its crime scenarios but, as Dunning notes, *The Whistler* presents 'stories of the everyday gone haywire, of common men driven to murder and then being tripped up in a cunning double-twist'.<sup>54</sup>

Nostalgic reminiscences of old time radio routinely evoke its captivating power, but with *The Whistler* listeners rarely discuss individual stories and tend instead to recall the mood of anticipation triggered by its opening. In a memoir of his 1950s Southern California childhood, for example, poet Christopher Buckley recollected that he 'didn't follow the mysteries but always felt a chill on my neck at the beginning and end of the show when I heard that eerie whistling'.<sup>55</sup> This is hardly surprising, as the program served up a different story every time, with distinct characters and intrigues, while the opening segment was a key feature of the program's serial identity that replayed the same intense and concentrated experience on a weekly basis. To the accompaniment of Wilbur Hatch's eerie two-octave minor-key melody, whistled live each time by Dorothy Roberts, the Whistler's sardonic voice invites the listener to take an imaginative journey into the shadows, to experience a nether world of intrigue, crime, corruption, greed, jealousy, sexual intrigue and warped psychological impulses. His standard introduction ran as follows:

I am the Whistler, and I know many things, for I walk by night. I know many strange tales, many secrets hidden in the hearts of men and women who have stepped into the shadows. Yes, I know the nameless terrors of which they dare not speak ....

Across 692 episodes from 1942 to 1955, serial repetition allowed this mysterious audio montage to burrow deep into the listener's consciousness.

### **The *Whistler*: Film Series**

With the film series, producer Rudolph Flothow clearly aimed to replicate the distinctive features that had made *The Whistler* a success on the air. To supply the story for the initial film, he hired J. Donald Wilson, who had created the radio program and scripted, directed and produced it for the first year or so.<sup>56</sup> The film's credit sequence emulates the program's memorable opening, translating the disembodied narrator into a mysterious voice and the shadow of a man clothed in a hat and trench coat, which prowls through the night-time streets to accompaniment of Dorothy Roberts' whistling. Following William Castle's directorial credit, the Whistler begins the narration with which he introduces every radio episode. Like most subsequent entries in the series, the film's opening sequence thus offers a literal representation of the Whistler's claim that he 'walks by night' and knows the men and woman who have 'stepped into the shadows'. The Whistler then looks in through the window of a waterfront bar, to draw attention to an anxious-looking, well-dressed man (Richard Dix) sitting at a booth. Teasing us with the announcement that he is there to meet 'a man whose business is death', the Whistler temporarily withdraws to let the drama unfold.

While conforming to the expectations of audiences who know the radio program, the simulation of its standard opening also serves as an atmospheric invitation for those unfamiliar with it. As the program was at that

time broadcast exclusively on the West Coast, the New York critics and audiences who greeted the film with enthusiasm may have lacked first-hand knowledge of the radio series, but they would doubtless have recognized familiar aesthetic and storytelling principles from audio drama. The film series also appropriated the program's signature storytelling device of the second-person narrational address. A good example occurs in the sixth film, *The Secret of The Whistler* (Sherman, 1946). Philandering husband Ralph Harrison (Richard Dix) is in his study contemplating the illness of his rich, bedridden wife, Edith (Mary Currier). As Ralph sits down in an armchair on the right of the frame to smoke a cigarette, the shadow of the Whistler is cast on the wall in the left background and moves across the shot (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Ralph Harrison and the shadow of the Whistler, *Secret of the Whistler* (1946, Columbia Pictures).

His taunting voice appears on the soundtrack to ventriloquize Ralph's thoughts: 'You're quite concerned, aren't you, Ralph. If Dr. Gunther can make Edith well again, it'll spoil all your plans. You know you're only waiting and hoping for her to die, so you'll be free to marry Kay'. The Whistler makes such interpretive intrusions throughout the film series.

Besides borrowing key story and storytelling principles from the radio program, however, Flothow and his collaborators drew on a broader network of contemporary cultural and cinematic sources to establish *The Whistler* as a viable screen property. Only two films were based on episodes from the radio series: the first, and *Voice of the Whistler* (Castle, 1945).<sup>57</sup> *The Secret of the Whistler*, *The Power of the Whistler* (Landers, 1945) and *The Thirteenth Hour* (Clemens, 1947) derived from original screen stories, while Eric Taylor reworked his 1936 *Black Mask* magazine story 'Murder to Music' for *Mysterious Intruder* (Castle, 1946).<sup>58</sup> The two remaining films – *The Mark of the Whistler* (Castle, 1944) and *The Return of the Whistler* (Lederman, 1948) – were similarly developed from pulp magazine stories, both written by the prolific Cornell Woolrich.<sup>59</sup>

Woolrich's deliriously oneiric fiction was immensely popular and influential in the 1940s, with many of his short stories and novels adapted both for the screen and for radio crime, thriller and horror anthologies such as *Molle Mystery Theatre* (1943–52), *Escape* (1947–54) and *Suspense*.<sup>60</sup> The radio version of *The Whistler* may have used original material rather than adaptations, but its stories were strongly influenced by Woolrich and like-minded crime writers. Woolrich's stories propel the reader on an agonizingly

suspenseful emotional ride that jettisons reason to tantalize with its own compulsive and absurdist logic. His characters are often existentially isolated figures who suffer all-consuming paranoid nightmares in which their grip on reality is dislocated through amnesia, hypnosis, drugs, mental disorder, morbid obsessions, unfathomable conspiracies and impossibly labyrinthine plots, with Woolrich conveying their 'gnawing anguish' and incomprehension via painfully vivid, often unhinged prose.<sup>61</sup> As Jonathan Rosenbaum comments: 'Despite all the purple prose, tired rewrites, and preposterous plots that crop up in his fiction, perhaps no other writer handles suspense better, or gives it the same degree of obsessional intensity'.<sup>62</sup> In a 1949 letter, Raymond Chandler described Woolrich as the 'best idea man' among contemporary crime writers but added that 'you have to read him fast and not analyze too much; he's too feverish'.<sup>63</sup> The *Whistler* films strive for precisely this kind of feverishly oneiric mood, which is commonplace across a wider range of 1940s Hollywood films – especially 'noir' movies such as *Detour* (Ulmer, 1945), *Suspense* (Tuttle, 1946) and *Dark Passage* (Daves, 1947) that flaunt an absurdist narrative logic. It is fitting, then, that *The Whistler* is the only film series that has been included within the *noir* canon.<sup>64</sup>

The horror films produced by Val Lewton's RKO B-unit were another major influence on the style of the *Whistler* films. This was due to the input of William Castle, director of the first four entries in the series. Although he achieved renown in the 1950s as the outlandish showman who directed gimmick-driven exploitation films like *Macabre* (1958), *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), and *The Tingler* (1959), Castle was applauded in the 1940s for his stylish handling of low-budget crime films. James Agee, Manny Farber and

Orson Welles praised his work on the 1944 King Brothers' production *When Strangers Marry*, while reviewers often commended the direction of his series films. *The Whistler* was only Castle's third film, and he was determined to use it as a directorial calling-card that would get him noticed in a highly competitive industry – particularly after reviewers slammed his 1943 debut *Once in a Lifetime*.<sup>65</sup> Castle claims in his autobiography that with *The Whistler* he 'tried every effect I could dream up to create a mood of terror: low-key lighting, wide-angle lenses to give an eerie feeling and a hand-held camera in many of the important scenes to give a sense of reality to the horror.'<sup>66</sup> Castle is describing here what critics would later identify as the 'noir style', an ostensive form of product differentiation that could be achieved on a miniscule budget (around \$75,000 in the case of *The Whistler*).<sup>67</sup> Castle's expressionist yet cost-conscious flourishes perfectly suited the plot and mood of *The Whistler*, and they would serve as the stylistic template for subsequent entries in the series. Castle's final *Whistler* film, *Mysterious Intruder* (1946), offers an especially self-conscious demonstration of chiaroscuro stylization as a technique for building a menacing atmosphere. As a private-eye film, it allowed Castle to riff off the flashy expressionism of RKO's Raymond Chandler adaptation *Murder, My Sweet* (Dmytryk, 1944), which similarly featured the hulking presence of Mike Mazurki as a villainous brute.

The brooding style Castle developed in the *Whistler* films enhanced their paranoid narratives and attracted critical enthusiasm. *Daily Variety*, for example, noted of *The Whistler* that 'Photography is very much on the sombre side. It may be deliberately so, to fit the tempo and mood of the story',<sup>68</sup> while Otis L. Guernsey Jr. praised Castle's work on *The Mark of The Whistler* for



establishing 'a slow, introspective mood to the piece [that] ... gives him ample opportunity to build a foreboding atmosphere out of significant objects, unusual camera angles and revealing close-ups'.<sup>69</sup> Critics most frequently praised Castle's construction and pacing of atmospheric scenes of suspense: the *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, suggested that, in *The Mark of the Whistler*, he 'never drags out his scenes unnecessarily, with the result that sequences are individually strong and more than one brought yesterday afternoon's audience up in its seat with a gasp'.<sup>70</sup>

By deploying such suspense sequences to build an enveloping sense of dread, the *Whistler* films reveal their kinship with both Woolrich's fiction and contemporary audio dramas. But Val Lewton's horror productions were the most immediate influence on Castle's style. Film historian Edmund Bansak identifies *When Strangers Marry* and the *Whistler* films as part of a group of 'Lewton facsimiles' that emerged after the breakout hit *Cat People* (Tourneur, 1942).<sup>71</sup> Along with *I Walked with a Zombie* (Tourneur, 1943), *The Seventh Victim* (Robson, 1943) and the Woolrich adaptation *The Leopard Man* (Tourneur, 1943), *Cat People* showed that intelligently-conceived and stylistically controlled atmospheric sequences could compensate for restricted budgets in crafting effective suspense thrillers. Lewton built his films around what he termed 'horror spots' – slowly-paced nighttime sequences of agonizing stillness that populate the shadows with unseen threats. Moreover, these films locate terror in everyday spaces: a swimming pool, an office, a subway train, and – especially – the street. *Cat People*, *The Seventh Victim* and *The Leopard Man* feature increasingly elaborate sequences in which a woman walks alone through deserted nighttime streets, fearful that a killer may

be stalking her. Castle included similar walking sequences in *The Whistler*, *Mysterious Intruder* and *When Strangers Marry*, but the *Whistler* films – even those not directed by Castle – reveal a more general Lewtonesque handling of scenarios of menace and suspense, and a similar interest in what *Cat People*'s scriptwriter DeWitt Bodeen calls the 'psychology of fear'.<sup>72</sup>

Contemporary reviews sometimes described Lewton's films as 'chillers' or 'weirdies' – designations that are also appropriate to *The Whistler* on radio and film, as they suggest the degree to which affect and atmosphere are more crucial than plot.<sup>73</sup> In this regard, *The Whistler* fits within a longer tradition of sensation-oriented popular fiction that was rooted in gothic literature and Edgar Allen Poe's horror and crime tales, and which had its most immediate precursors in American pulp magazines. The term 'weird' was frequently applied to forms of pulp fiction that dealt in scenarios of the bizarre, the horrific and the fantastical – most explicitly in *Weird Tales* (1923–54), the most influential fantasy pulp, and the controversial 1930s cycle of sadistic horror and shudder pulps that specialized in tales of 'weird menace'.<sup>74</sup> In a 1927 essay H.P. Lovecraft championed the 'weird tale' as a superior form of literary horror precisely because its investment in sensation offered a liberating transcendence of rationality:

The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's

utmost rim. And of course, the more completely and unifiedly a story conveys this atmosphere, the better it is as a work of art in the given medium.<sup>75</sup>

By the 1940s, Lovecraft's 'unknown spheres and powers' were no longer necessarily external but were frequently codified in psychological terms, as the darker recesses of the mind. This is certainly the case with the morbid psychological inflections of both the Lewton and the *Whistler* films.

The *Whistler* movies thus intersect with a wider sensation-oriented popular culture – a 'pulp serialscape' – that encompasses magazine and paperback fiction, movies, radio, comic books and, later, television. Indeed, the first *Whistler* film gestures towards the serialscape of popular culture by explicitly referencing an array of contemporary media – including comic books, popular psychology texts, newspapers, the movies, radio, and magazines (Fig. 3 a–f).

While the inaugural film locates itself as part of a continuum of sensational popular culture, ensuing entries in the series were influenced not so much by the radio program as by the particular manner in which Castle and his collaborators had translated it to the screen. While retaining those elements of the radio program appropriated by the first movie, subsequent entries in the *Whistler* series set out to replay, rework and renew the distinctive amalgam of narrative and stylistic features that made the initial film so successful. This is exemplified most clearly in their use of Richard Dix as a serial protagonist.



Figures 3a–f: Popular cultural serialscape in *The Whistler* (1944, Columbia Pictures) (frame grab).

### The Gnawing Anguish of Richard Dix

A popular Hollywood leading man of the 1920s and early 1930s, 'lantern-jawed' action hero Richard Dix landed an Academy Award nomination for his role as the flamboyant Yancey Cravat in the epic Western *Cimarron* (Ruggles, 1931).<sup>76</sup> His waning career through the late 1930s, however, saw Dix cast in progressively less prestigious films. His fifteen-year tenure at RKO concluded with his playing of the psychologically tormented captain of Val Lewton's *The Ghost Ship* (Robson, 1943), after which Dix signed to Columbia – where he ended his thirty-year screen career with the *Whistler* films. As with Warner Baxter in the *Crime Doctor* series and Warren William in the *Lone Wolf* films, Columbia aimed to exploit Dix's name value as a once major star – a common strategy in B-sector production. But their use of Dix allows the first seven *Whistler* films to generate a distinctive serial dynamic, as he plays a different character from film to film. The Whistler may recur as a serial narrator and emissary of fate, but he is hardly a character in the traditional sense. It is Richard Dix who provides the emotional core of the series, and gives an unusual twist to the play of repetition and variation that coordinates series production.

The hero of a film series generally offers a stable and consistent identity from film to film but, as Edmund Bansak observes, in the first seven *Whistler* films Dix sometimes 'played a villain, sometimes a hero, often his character was a little of both'.<sup>77</sup> The presence of the same actor at the centre of the films insinuates, moreover, that these diverse characterizations can be read as serial variations on a theme – in providing multiple perspectives on male identity. The series not only subjects Dix to a multiplicity of guises from film to

film, but the plots also deal explicitly with the enigmatic identity of their protagonists – with Dix's characters suffering various forms of psychological malaise, disjunction or dysfunction. And no matter what character he plays, Dix brings to these films an off-kilter performance style of creeping anxiety that makes a powerful contribution to their atmosphere of dis-ease.

William Castle's autobiography relates a perhaps apocryphal yet nonetheless illuminating story about how he prepared Richard Dix for his role in the first film through a campaign of harassment that made him 'off-center, restless, fidgety, and nervous as a cat'.<sup>78</sup> Dix plays industrialist Earl C. Conrad, who is tortured by guilt after failing to save his wife from drowning after a Japanese torpedo sinks their cruise ship. Through an intermediary, Lefty Vigran (Don Costello), he hires an unknown hit-man to kill him at some juncture over the following week. In a twist typical of both the radio and film series, Conrad learns his wife is still alive in a Japanese internment camp – and tries to cancel the assassination.<sup>79</sup> But Vigran is killed in a shoot-out with police, leaving Conrad with no means of contacting the killer. Consumed by paranoia, he fears that everyone he meets could be out to murder him. Besides focussing on Conrad's plight, the film alternates with scenes depicting the psychotic killer, played by J. Carroll Naish, who, instead of merely dispatching his prey, relishes the psychological terrorism he can inflict on Conrad. For example, the killer uses the surveillance technique of 'rough shadowing', which makes the subject aware they are being followed, and at one point he toys with the idea of frightening Conrad to death – which, like a true connoisseur, he describes as 'something new in the art of murder: no fuss, no muss'.<sup>80</sup>

The twists and turns of the plot may defy credibility, but they allow the film to build a suitably oneiric atmosphere by plunging Earl Conrad into a progressive state of anxiety. He tries to navigate his way through a continually shifting landscape of unexpected and inexplicable threats, running frantically from a persecutor he cannot see and does not know, but whom he himself has set in motion. The paranoid and exhausted victim of a seemingly hostile and irrational universe, Earl Conrad is a masochistic fall-guy who is manipulated by a sadistic killer, by a sadistic narrative, by the Whistler, and by his own darker impulses. As the convoluted storyline uncoils, Conrad's tumultuous anguish is writ large across Richard Dix's face – a spectacle of emotional pain and disorientation that would become a keynote of his subsequent performances (Fig. 4a–d).

As Dan Van Neste observes, Dix's characterizations

contain an edgy, unsettling quality perfectly in keeping with the films' moods and dark themes. With a face etched in sadness and melancholy, he was particularly effective in portraying the duality of the *Whistler* protagonists who appear refined and outwardly passive, but who harbour dark secrets which often manifest themselves in desperate acts.<sup>81</sup>

Laden with reversals and fatalistic ironies, these suspense narratives dislodge the protagonists from their everyday lives to manoeuvre them into an ever-accelerating maelstrom of dislocation and paranoia, with Dix reprising his angst-ridden demeanour. As in the first film, the trajectory of events often has



Figures 4a–d: Richard Dix’s gnawing anguish in *The Thirteenth Hour* (1947), *Voice of the Whistler* (1945), *Power of the Whistler* (1945), and *Secret of the Whistler* (1946; all Columbia Pictures) (frame grabs).



an absurdist and irrational logic that builds a nightmarish atmosphere resembling Woolrich's fiction. The prominence of scenarios involving amnesia or other forms of schismatic identity suggests the centrality of psychic trauma to these films. Characters in *The Mark of the Whistler* and *The Power of the Whistler*, for example, engage wittingly or unwittingly in identity masquerades. In the latter film, The Whistler's narration explicitly addresses the uncertain knowability of identity when he introduces William Everest (Dix), a confused amnesiac who is ultimately exposed as a homicidal maniac:

Here is a strange man. Formed in God's image, according to the Bible. But how far is image from mirage? The two words sound alike. This man looks like all others, but what separates him from his fellows? It cannot be seen from the naked eye.

Pointing to the discrepancy between how we see things and how things are, the Whistler foreshadows developments within the film's narrative. Attracted by Everest's befuddled vulnerability, kindly Jean Lang (Janis Carter) assists him in the attempt to discover his true identity. Halfway through the film, Everest remembers who he is but conceals this knowledge from Jean, manipulating her so he can exact a murderous scheme of vengeance. However, the Whistler's characteristic nugget of pulp philosophy has broader applicability to the series, which often suggests how seeming certainties of identity are illusory – that image may be little more than a mirage. In *Voice of*

*the Whistler*, for example, successful industrialist John Sinclair (Dix) is actually a tortured and conflicted man who, in the course of the film, exhibits a splintering of self into a series of incompatible identities – a lonely and sick businessman, a regenerate romantic, and ultimately a jealous murderer.

*Mysterious Intruder* and *The Secret of the Whistler* take a different approach by casting Dix as flawed characters who are blighted by mercenary impulses. The former introduces him as tough private eye Don Gale, an unscrupulous, greedy and scheming operator who lacks the moral integrity of Philip Marlowe and other Hollywood detectives. Like characters in other *Whistler* films and radio episodes, Gale is ultimately punished for his cupidity – when he is (mistakenly) shot dead by police. He may not be a divided character in the same way as other *Whistler* protagonists, but Gale nonetheless demonstrates a disjunction between outward appearance (as a lawman) and inner intentions (as a criminal). *The Secret of the Whistler* gives Dix his most unsympathetic role in the series, as talentless and venal artist Ralph Harrison. After marrying his mistress, the glamorous, gold-digging model Kay Morrell (Leslie Brooks), Ralph fears she will expose him to the police for killing his first wife (who, unknown to both of them, died of heart failure before he could enact his murderous scheme). Dix may play an irredeemable scoundrel, but the film nonetheless subjects Ralph to an extended spectacle of male victimhood in keeping with other films in the series, as his increasing paranoia ultimately leads him to strangles Kay in a fit of rage. In an ironic conclusion very much in keeping with the narrative twists of the radio series, Ralph is arrested for the impulsive killing of his second wife rather than for a premeditated murder he did not actually accomplish.

Dix's final appearance in the series returns to the paranoid narrative logic with which it commenced, as the protagonist of *The Thirteenth Hour* is wrongfully accused of murder and must combat an insidious conspiracy. Despite its happy ending, *The Thirteenth Hour* provides a further outing for Richard Dix's performance of fatigued dislocation, enhanced in this instance by visible signs of the illness that would kill him two years later. After Dix retired from the screen, Columbia tried to revive the series with Michael Duane in the lead, but *The Return of The Whistler's* commercial failure ensured the series was laid to rest ... in the cinema at least. It persisted on radio until 1955, and a syndicated 1954 television version provided the Whistler with a final opportunity to tell of the strange secrets hidden in the hearts of men and women who have stepped into the shadows.

## Conclusion

The *Whistler* films aimed to develop a cinematic analogy for the spellbinding atmosphere of the radio series. To achieve this, they drew on distinctive techniques from the radio program, especially the use of an uncanny narrator with a penchant for exposing characters' thoughts and desires. But the production team were also influenced by other tendencies at play in contemporary low-budget cinema, including: the use of a recurring once-major star to anchor and promote the series; the cultivation of an oneiric, memorably atmospheric style that, as Val Lewton demonstrated, could be achieved with minimal expenditure; and the inclusion of themes that had broader cultural and cinematic currency, such as the fascination with morbid psychology and dysfunctional masculinity. Commonplace on radio but much rarer in cinema,

the anthology format further helped distinguish *The Whistler* from the usual run of character-centred film series. Of course, the ‘freakishness’ that had so impressed New York critics with the first film dissipated as the series became more familiar to audiences: a 1947 *Daily Variety* review, for example, suggested that *Secret of the Whistler* follows the ‘usual formula of melodrama, vengeance and a touch of irony’.<sup>82</sup> The *Whistler* films nonetheless fulfilled Columbia’s ambition to deliver a revitalized style of B-film series that cannily built on the achievements of Lewton’s RKO horror fare and contemporary radio drama to formulate a topical variety of quality pulp.

From today’s perspective, it is enticing to regard these low budget series films – with their unusual narration, their stylized and absurdist plot design, and their brooding atmosphere of psychological malaise – as prime examples of ‘film noir’, especially in relation to the oneiric tendency championed by pioneering critics Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in their 1955 study *Panorama du Film Noir Americain*.<sup>83</sup> Critics and enthusiasts, however, tend to value noir films as singular and distinctive works that transcend Hollywood convention in some way. Branding the *Whistler* films as noir may illuminate some of the characteristics they share in common with other contemporaneous productions, but the lens of film noir does not necessarily permit adequate scrutiny of the intersecting network of industrial, cultural, and aesthetic factors that shaped these films as a serial and transmedial property.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Mark of the Whistler: A Tightly-Knit Thriller', *Hollywood Reporter*, 3 October 1944, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Archer Winsten, 'Movie Talk', *New York Post*, 29 April 1944, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Wear., 'The Whistler' (review), *Variety*, 3 May 1944, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Whistler' (review), *Showmen's Trade Review*, 8 April 1944, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Alton Cook, 'Movies: Rialto's Tenant, *The Whistler*, Tingling Man Hunt Thriller', *New York World-Telegram*, 28 April 1944, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> See 'The Mark of the Whistler: A Tightly-Knit Thriller', p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> David Glickman, 'Hollywood Turning to Radio for Talent', *Broadcasting*, 1 October 1940, pp. 74–75.

<sup>8</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition), Boston: Wadsworth, 2006 [2002], p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> Yannis Tzioumakis, 'Style Development and Product Upgrading: Monogram Pictures, the Ambitious B Movie, and the East Side Kids Films Directed by Joseph H. Lewis', in Gary D. Rhodes (ed.), *The Films of Joseph H. Lewis*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1999, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Tino Balio, 'Feeding the Maw of Exhibition', in Balio (ed.), *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1995, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> See Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013, p. 6.

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- <sup>13</sup> See Kyle Dawson Edwards, “Monogram Means Business”: B-film Marketing and Series Filmmaking at Monogram Pictures’, *Film History: An International Journal* 23:4 (2011), pp. 387–95.
- <sup>14</sup> Brian Taves, ‘The B Film: Hollywood’s Other Half’, in Tino Balio (ed.), *Grand Design*, pp. 314–5.
- <sup>15</sup> See, for example, Gary D. Rhodes, “The double feature evil”: Efforts to Eliminate the American Dual Bill’, *Film History: An International Journal* 23:1 (2011), pp. 57–74.
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, London: Simon & Schuster, 1989, p. 257.
- <sup>17</sup> Balio, ‘Feeding the Maw of Exhibition’, p. 101.
- <sup>18</sup> Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, p. 64.
- <sup>19</sup> Mae Dena Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry: A Study in Industrial Organization*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944, p. 139.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, ‘Studio Story Buyers Face Book, Play Shortage’, *Motion Picture Herald*, 13 March 1943, p. 13.
- <sup>21</sup> For further discussion of the 1940 consent decree, see: Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, pp. 20–21, 64–65, 160–61; Janet Staiger, ‘Individualism vs Collectivism: The Shift to Independent Production in the US Film Industry’, in Steve Neale (ed.), *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, London & New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 333; and Jennifer Porst, ‘The Preservation of Competition: Hollywood and Antitrust Law’, in Paul McDonald, Emily Carman, Eric Hoyt and Philip Drake (eds), *Hollywood and the Law*, London: BFI/Palgrave, 2015, pp. 111–12.

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example: 'New War Restrictions Tighten on Industry', *Motion Picture Herald*, 5 December 1942, p. 13; 'WPB Dallies with Duals', *Motion Picture Herald*, 12 December 1942, pp. 14–16; and Francis L. Burt, 'WPB Sets Film Schedules, Saving 400,000,000 Feet', *Motion Picture Herald*, 9 January 1943, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Rhodes, "The double feature evil", p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> 'Speech on Duals Stirs Alarms and Debates', *Motion Picture Herald*, 21 November 1942, p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> 'Small Producers ask Free Market, If Duals Banned', *Motion Picture Herald*, 28 November 1943, p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example: 'WPB Dallies with Duals'; 'Leading Showmen Declare Positions on Duals', *Motion Picture Herald*, 19 December 1942, pp. 14–16, 'Exhibitor Opinion Sees Duals as Local Issue', *Motion Picture Herald*, 26 December 1942, pp. 36–37, Francis L. Burt, 'WPB Explores Duals; Denies Intention to Ban Them', *Motion Picture Herald*, 2 January 1943, pp. 13–14.

<sup>27</sup> See Tino Balio, 'Columbia Pictures: The Making of a Motion Picture Major, 1930-1943', in David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (eds), *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996, pp. 419–33; and Bernard F. Dick (ed.), *Columbia Pictures: Portrait of a Studio*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> 'New Darmour Series', *Motion Picture Daily*, 24 June 1940, p. 2; "Ellery Queen" Rights Acquired by Darmour', *Film Daily*, 20 February 1940, p. 2; and 'Larry Darmour Signs Ellery Queen Authors', *Film Daily*, 26 June 1940, p. 2.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Program Notes from the Studios', *Showmen's Trade Review*, 24 February 1940, p. 22; Douglas W. Churchill, 'Screen News Here and in Hollywood', *New York Times*, 24 June 1940, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> See Eric Wilt, *Hardboiled in Hollywood*, Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1991, pp. 48–96.

<sup>31</sup> Wilt, *Hardboiled in Hollywood*, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> See 'Ellery Queen and the Perfect Crime' (review), *Film Daily*, 10 July 1941, p. 6, and Edwin Schallert, 'Historical Boer film Subject of New Film', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1942, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> See: 'Larry Darmour, Producer, Dies', *Motion Picture Herald*, 21 March 1942, p. 34, and 'Continue Darmour Unit As Feeder to Columbia', *Variety*, 1 April 1942, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> *The Shadow* (1940) and *Captain Midnight* (1942), two of Darmour's Columbia chapter-plays, were also based on radio properties.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Frank Eng, 'Good Acting Gives Crime Doctor Lift', *Hollywood Reporter*, 1 May 1946, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Mayer distinguishes between serial figures such as Fu Manchu (or similarly stylized figures like Dracula and the Lone Ranger), who are 'flat, familiar, and iconic', and the 'series characters' found in continuing soap opera narratives, who are more fully fleshed out through a process of ongoing development across long stretches of time (*Serial Fu Manchu*, p. 9). Mayer's distinction is not necessarily appropriate for filmic serial figures such as Charlie Chan, Philip Marlowe or Michael Shayne, whose onscreen incarnation depends very much on quite sophisticated characterization motifs added through performance. I will henceforth use the term 'serial figure' to denote



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the central figure within a series property, but without the particular significance Mayer charges it with. Some stars were firmly or exclusively associated with a particular serial figure – William Boyd, for example, was the only actor to play Hopalong Cassidy across 66 films and successful radio and television series – but it was not uncommon for several actors to take stabs at serial figures within a film series. Thus, Warner Oland, Sidney Toler and Roland Winters successively impersonated Charlie Chan for the Fox and Monogram series, and Ellery Queen, Michael Shayne, The Saint, and The Falcon were similarly played by different actors onscreen.

<sup>37</sup> Universal also attempted this strategy with a series of six films based on the radio horror anthology program *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*, from *Calling Doctor Death* (Le Borg, 1943) to *Pillow of Death* (Fox, 1945), which cast Lon Chaney in a different role in each episode.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example Marion Radcliff, 'Walk Into My Parlor', *Billboard*, 20 February 1943, pp. 6, 8; and 'Gory Road With Detour Sign', *Billboard*, 30 October 1943, p. 6. In 1944, John K. Hutchens accused radio horror shows of being 'closer to the abattoir than the laboratory', owing to their reliance on graphic and plentiful killings ('Crime Pays – On the Radio', *New York Times Magazine*, 19 March 1944, p. SM16).

<sup>39</sup> 'It Takes IDEAS to Make a Network ... Here Are Four Notes on a Good One' (advertisement), *Broadcasting*, 25 September 1944, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Zuma Palmer, 'Report from the Coast', *New York Times*, 8 August 1943, p. X7.

<sup>41</sup> 'An Idea that Nails 551,000 Families to Their Chairs!' (advertisement), *Broadcasting*, 19 July 1943, pp. 30–31.

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- <sup>42</sup> Carolyn Cassady, 'Anne Murphy', in Brenda Knight (ed.), *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses*, Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1996, p. 67.
- <sup>43</sup> Tim Crook describes this practice as 'imaginative spectacle'. Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, London & New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 62.
- <sup>44</sup> Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics and American Radio Drama*, University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 92.
- <sup>45</sup> 'The Whistler' (review), *Billboard*, 10 May 1947, p. 11.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid. The reviewer was not convinced by the success of the program's 'gimmick', however, deeming it 'strictly pseudo'.
- <sup>47</sup> John Crosby, 'Emily Post Legislates for Radio', *Washington Post*, 6 April 1947, p. S5.
- <sup>48</sup> 'The Whistler' (review), *Variety*, 19 May 1947, p. 34.
- <sup>49</sup> John Dunning, 'The Whistler', in *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old Time Radio*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 720.
- <sup>50</sup> John Crosby, 'Emily Post Legislates for Radio', p. S5.
- <sup>51</sup> Dick Bertel, 'Interview with William Spier', *The Golden Age of Radio*, WOTC, Hartford, CT, November 1970; available from [www.goldenage-wtic.org/gaor-08.html](http://www.goldenage-wtic.org/gaor-08.html).
- <sup>52</sup> Peggy Carter, 'It Could Happen to You!', *Radio Life*, 7 July 1946, p. 31.
- <sup>53</sup> 'The Whistler' (review), *Billboard*, 1 August 1942, p. 8.
- <sup>54</sup> Dunning, 'The Whistler,' p. 720.
- <sup>55</sup> Christopher Buckley, *Cruising State: Growing Up in Southern California*, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994, p. 90

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<sup>56</sup> Dan Van Neste, *The Whistler: Stepping Into the Shadows*, Albany, GA: Bear Manor Press, 2011, p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> The screen story of first film may have derived, at least in part, from Wilson's script for the episode 'Necrophobia' (#53, 30 July 1943) – though this is impossible to verify as this episode is not available. Allan Radar's script 'Checkmate for Murder' (#148, 25 March 1945) provided the basis for *Voice of the Whistler*.

<sup>58</sup> *The Power of the Whistler* was based on an original screenplay by Aubrey Wisberg; Richard H. Landau & Raymond L. Schrock scripted *The Secret of the Whistler*, and *The Thirteenth Hour* was based an original screen story by Leslie Edgely entitled 'The Hunter is a Fugitive' and scripted by Schrock and Edward Bock.

<sup>59</sup> *The Mark of the Whistler* derived from Woolrich's 1942 *Black Mask* story 'Dormant Account', while *The Return of the Whistler* freely adapted his 1940 *Argosy* story 'All at Once, No Alice'.

<sup>60</sup> For an extensive list of Woolrich's radio credits, see Francis M. Nevins, *First You Dream, Then You Die*, New York: The Mysterious Press, 1988, pp. 579–85.

<sup>61</sup> The phrase 'gnawing anguish' comes from Richard Corliss, 'That Old Feeling: Woolrich's World', *Time*, 8 December 2003:  
<http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,557218,00.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'Black Window: Cornell Woolrich and Movies', 21 August 2016 (originally in *Film Comment*, September-October 1984):  
[www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2016/08/black-window-cornell-woolrich-and-movies-tk/](http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/2016/08/black-window-cornell-woolrich-and-movies-tk/)

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<sup>63</sup> Dorothy Gardiner and Katherine Sorley Walker (eds), *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, London: Four Square, 1966, p. 48.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Spencer Selby, *Dark City: The Film Noir*, Chicago & London: St James Press, 1984, p. 203.

<sup>65</sup> William Castle, *Step Right Up!: I'm Going to Scare the Pants Off America*, William Castle Productions, 2010 [1976], pp. 69–73.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> For an influential account of the B-film's contribution to the so-called 'noir style', see Paul Kerr, 'Out of What Past? Notes on the B Film Noir', *Screen Education*, 32–33 (Autumn 1979–80), pp. 45–65.

<sup>68</sup> 'Film Preview', *Daily Variety*, 21 March 1944, p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., 'Mark of the Whistler' (review), *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 November 1945, p. 29.

<sup>70</sup> 'The Mark of the Whistler: A Tightly-Knit Thriller', p. 3. *Motion Picture Daily* similarly commended *The Whistler* for the way its 'ponderous atmosphere achieved through settings and general background, rather than the actual story, sustains necessary suspense.' Helen McNamara, 'The Whistler' (review), *Motion Picture Daily*, 4 May 1944, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Edmund Bansak, *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003, p. 364. Other Lewton-influenced films include *The Return of the Vampire* (Landers, 1943), *Cry of the Werewolf* (Levin, 1944), *The Soul of a Monster* (Jason, 1944) and *Woman Who Came Back* (Colmes, 1945).

<sup>72</sup> Bodeen, who also wrote *The Curse of the Cat People* (Fritsch and Wise, 1944) and *The Seventh Victim*, suggested that Lewton's films are 'dramatizations of the psychology of fear. Man fears the unknown – the dark,

that which may lurk in the shadows .... That which he cannot see fills him with basic and understandable terror'. Quoted in Mark A. Viera, 'Darkness, Darkness: The Films of Val Lewton', *Brights Lights* 50 (2005):

[www.brightlightsfilm.com/50/lewton.htm](http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/50/lewton.htm).

<sup>73</sup> On the use of 'weird' as a term to describe Lewton's films, see Henry Myers, 'Weird and Wonderful', *The Screen Writer* (July 1945), pp. 18–23.

<sup>74</sup> For a discussion of such 'weird menace' pulps as *Dime Mystery* and *Dime Detective*, mostly from Popular Publications, see Robert Kenneth Jones, *The Shudder Pulps: A History of the Weird Menace Magazines of the 1930s*, Wildside Press, 1975.

<sup>75</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (1927),

[www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx](http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx).

<sup>76</sup> 'Lantern-jawed' and 'square-jawed' were popular epithets applied to Dix from very early in his career – see, for example, Charles W. Moore, 'Home Town Stories of the Stars', *The New Movie Magazine* (July 1930), p. 52.

<sup>77</sup> Bansak, *Fearing the Dark*, p. 264.

<sup>78</sup> 'To achieve a mood of desperation, I insisted that Dix give up smoking and go on a diet. This made him nervous and irritable, particularly when I gave him early-morning calls and kept him waiting on the set – sometimes for an entire day before using him in a scene .... When I finally used him in a scene, I'd make him do it over and over again until he was ready to explode. It achieved the desired effect – that of a man haunted by fear and trying to keep from being murdered'. Castle, *Step Right Up*, p. 74.

<sup>79</sup> Although a later revelation informs us that she dies in the internment camp, leaving Conrad free to marry his devoted secretary Alice (Gloria Stuart).

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<sup>80</sup> The depiction of this sadistic killer was probably influenced by the high profile attained by psychological warfare techniques courtesy of military activities in the Second World War. See, for example, Hans Speir, 'Psychological Warfare Reconsidered', in Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell (eds), *The Policy Sciences: Recent Developments in Scope and Method*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1951, pp. 252–70.

<sup>81</sup> Van Neste, *The Whistler*, p. 45.

<sup>82</sup> 'The Secret of the Whistler' (review), *Daily Variety*, 7 February 1947, p. 13.

<sup>83</sup> Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, *Panorama of American Film Noir*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002, p. 142.